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Housekeepers' Chat

Friday, February 20, 1931.

NOT FOR PUBLICATION

Subject: "Dinner for Washington's Birthday." Information from the Bureau of Home Economics, United States Department of Agriculture.

Leaflet available: "Rabbit Recipes."

Betty Jane's class at school is having a Washington's Birthday celebration today, an event which all Betty Jane's relatives and friends have been hearing about for weeks. This morning she started off for school twenty minutes ahead of time in her eagerness to get there, carrying a little flag and a three-cornered red hat which she had made at home for the big event.

Uncle Ebenezer says school celebrations like this certainly stimulate an interest in history and keep uncles hustling when it comes to answering questions. Betty Jane has showered him with questions all the week about what kind of clothes Martha Washington wore, what the rooms they lived in looked like, what kind of flowers grew in the garden at Mount Vernon and so forth. Uncle Ebenezer has had to do a good deal of brushing up on his American history recently to be ready for all this questioning.

Last night at dinner I came in for my share of it. Betty Jane paused in the midst of her carrots and said, "What food do you suppose Martha Washington cooked for George Washington on his birthday? Do you suppose she baked him a birthday cake?"

"Why, Betty Jane," said Billy, "didn't you know that Mrs. Washington had cooks? She was a great lady and in those days great ladies never did the cooking themselves. They just told their servants how to do it. Isn't that right, Uncle Ebenezer?"

"Oh, ask your Aunt Sammy," said Uncle Ebenezer, "I'll do my best to answer questions about battles and enemy red coats and Indians, and even about the making of the Constitution, but when it comes to what George Washington ate on his birthday or how it was cooked, that's too much for me."

"Well, what did he eat, Aunt Sammy? You tell me please," persisted Betty Jane.

My guess is that early on the morning of February twenty-second, the First Lady of the Land was up supervising the preparation of the fowl, the game or the ham, or attending to the mixing of the great rich cakes. She would see to it that a bountiful array of jellies, jams, and pickles and preserves was brought out from the big storeroom to supply the feast. And they had real feasts in those days. Just one look in a colonial cook book is enough to prove that. Housekeepers today would gasp at a recipe for a single cake calling for 18 eggs and a pound and a half of butter, but just such generous proportions were used in our forefather's day. And at that time no one ever heard of balanced menus or adequate meals. The general opinion was that indigestion and other similar afflictions were punishments sent from heaven, rather than the results of over-eating and eating the wrong food. Vitamins and calories were as unknown at that time as radios and bobbed hair.

When the hostess today serves a Washington's Birthday feast she can use many of the favorite dishes of Washington's day but adapt them to present standards of cooking and eating.

The menu specialist kept her promise about planning a Washington's Birthday dinner menu and I'm all ready to give it to you today. If you have a Betty Jane in your family, I'm sure she'll be especially interested.

If you are having company and making it a fancy party, there are many attractive favors and decorations to use. Tiny colored dolls with powdered hair and full flowered-silk skirts make cunning favors and may hold the place cards at the table. Fluffy white lamp or candle shades, dark green ivy, and the oldest you have in silver, linen, china, and glass add to the colonial atmosphere. Three-cornered hats of red paper or cardboard may hold nuts or candy. I once saw a George Washington centerpiece for the table made by a boy in the family. It was a miniature block-house made of wood, with tiny American flags flying on top, pine twigs to look like trees and a piece of mirror to represent ice.

Cherry tree and hatchet designs may be used in cutting out cookies and sandwiches. Cherry tarts or cherry sandwiches made with bright red jelly are suitable for tea.

Now our dinner menu: for the main dish, Fried Rabbit or Rabbit en casserole, or Fricassee Chicken; Baked Potatoes on the half shell; Buttered Peas or a green leaf vegetable; Asparagus salad with pimiento garnish on lettuce; and for dessert, either Cherry Pie, or Cherry Sundae with hatchet-shaped cookies. That's quite a lengthy menu, so I'll say it over again. (REPEAT).

Domestic rabbit meat, which is being used more and more today, is so delicate in flavor and texture and so white in color that every inch of it is like the breast of chicken. This meat rivals turkey, capon, or tender chicken, so you can see why the Menu Specialist chose it for this special dinner. Of

course, in Washington's time there was no domestic rabbit meat to be bought. He had to eat wild rabbits, or "wild hare" as it was then called, but I have heard that he enjoyed them. Young, tender, plump rabbits should be fried or broiled -- that is, cooked quickly at a high temperature without any moisture. Since domestic rabbit meat is not very juicy, it is well to hold in every bit of the natural juices in frying. The individual pieces are dipped in a thin batter to coat the meat and hold in the juice. Then place them in a hot pan with a few tablespoons of very hot fat. If the fat isn't hot enough the batter will stick to the pan and pull away from the rabbit. A platter of fried domestic rabbit garnished with parsley and served with milk gravy is much like that old Southern favorite, fried chicken and cream gravy. The Recipe Lady thinks that the white fine meat of the rabbit makes it even better than chicken.

This reminds me that there is a booklet on rabbit recipes full of attractive and helpful illustrations giving recipes for cooking rabbit in many different ways. Now I'll give you the recipe for fried rabbit.

Wipe the dressed meat of a young rabbit with a damp cloth and cut into pieces for serving. Beat one egg yolk, add 1/2 cup milk and 3/4 teaspoon of salt, and stir into 1/2 cup of flour to make a smooth batter. In a heavy skillet heat 4 tablespoons of fat very hot so that it will set the batter quickly. Dip each piece of rabbit into the batter until well coated; then drop it into the hot fat. As soon as the meat is browned, reduce the heat and cook at a moderate temperature for 25 to 30 minutes or until it is tender.

For each cup of gravy desired, use 2 tablespoons of pan drippings and 1-1/2 tablespoons of flour. Blend the fat and flour thoroughly in the skillet, add 1 cup of milk and stir until thickened. Add chopped parsley, salt, and pepper to season.

Of course, if you cannot buy rabbit in your market fricasseed chicken will suit this menu just as well.

The recipe for baked potatoes on the half shell is in your radio cook book.

For the salad, lay three or four stalks of canned or cooked asparagus parallel on crisp lettuce. To add a dash of bright red color, lay a narrow band of canned pimento over them and serve with French dressing.

